

## Understanding Societal Perspectives on African Interventions: a Methodological Agenda

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## Understanding Societal Perspectives on African Interventions

A Methodological Agenda

Antonia Witt

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# Understanding Societal Perspectives on African Interventions: A Methodological Agenda

**Antonia Witt**

## ABSTRACT

In defending and enforcing continental and sub-regional norms, African regional organizations are increasingly present in their member states. This holds particularly true for the area of peace and security, in which the norms and instruments of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) have been regularly applied across the continent. However, despite this presence on the ground, how people and groups living in countries affected by the policies and interventions of African regional organizations experience and evaluate such endeavors has so far been largely ignored in the scholarly debate about African regional organizations. In order to address this lacuna, this working paper presents a methodological agenda for studying societal perspectives on African regional interventions. In so doing, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of three different methodological approaches – media analysis, survey research, and focus group/interview research – and show how each of these approaches sheds new light on societal consequences of and reactions to African interventions. With this discussion, I demonstrate the methodological feasibility and value-added of studying societal perspectives on African interventions. I also show that the choice of method is not only a matter of available resources and skills, but has a crucial impact on what kind of society and societal perspectives are made visible.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

On the African continent, international efforts to build peace and prevent violent conflicts are no longer the sole purview of global or western actors like the United Nations and former colonial powers.<sup>1</sup> Rather, African regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have developed wide-ranging norms and institutional capacities that allow these organizations to intervene in their member states in order to prevent violence, build peace, and defend democratic governance. Since the establishment of the so-called African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in 2004, the AU and other African regional organizations have intervened in at least 21 out of 55 African countries through mediation and negotiation or peace support operations. According to the most recent data, in 2018 African regional organizations actively engaged in resolving 29 out of 53 violent conflicts in Africa, with a clear growth in the share of conflicts covered compared to previous years (IPSS 2020: 4). This is in line with a more general observation, namely that intervention is an increasingly regionalized phenomenon, that is, in today's world regional rather than global actors are the primary interveners, not only in Africa (Smit 2019).

In defending and enforcing continental and sub-regional norms, African regional organizations are increasingly present in their member states. This is true for very overt forms – ‘transterritorial deployments’ (Latham 2001: 75) – where regional peacekeepers, mediators, and human rights observers through their physical presence bring regional organizations ‘to the ground’. It is also

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<sup>1</sup> This research has benefitted from funding by the German Research Foundation (DFG) through the project grant WI 5387/1-1 “Local perceptions of regional interventions: AU and ECOWAS in Burkina Faso and The Gambia”. An earlier version of this working paper was submitted as book chapter as part of the volume “APSA Inside-Out: Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture”, edited by Ulf Engel, Linnéa Gelot, Jens Herpolsheimer, and Katharina Döring. I would like to thank the editors and all participants at the author workshop in Abuja, Nigeria for very valuable feedback on an earlier version of this text.

evident in less overt forms such as through the implementation of regional migration and mobility norms or capacity-building programs for state officials to strengthen democratic governance. However, despite this presence on the ground, how people and groups living in countries affected by the policies and interventions of African regional organizations experience and evaluate such endeavors has so far been largely ignored in the scholarly debate about African regional organizations. This research and knowledge gap is particularly surprising for those most overt forms of regional presence on the ground, that is interventions taking place under the African Peace and Security Architecture (Witt & Khadiagala 2018: 138). Effects and success of these interventions have so far only been established on the basis of external criteria – that is they have either been measured in terms of the organizations’ own stated goals (e.g. as expressed in official statements of the AU’s Peace and Security Council) or with regard to researchers’ own criteria. This reflects the dominant principles in academic knowledge production defining ‘valuable’ knowledge on grounds such as objectivity, generalizability, and measurability (see also Peter 2016: 10). A case in point is the APSA Impact Report, a regularly published report from the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) in Addis Ababa. The report is the first comprehensive project to measure the quality and effectiveness of African regional interventions. Its findings are not only used for academic analyses but also inform policy choices, not least those of APSA’s main donors. Although as such a very valuable source, the reports’ assessments are based on both external criteria as well as third-hand data: effectiveness is measured along three categories – (1) timeliness and adequacy, (2) goal achievement, and (3) de-escalating effect (IPSS 2019: 10; IPSS 2020: 9) – while the reports data base consists of official AU/RECs documents, publicly available sources, and expert analyses (IPSS 2019: 24). The identified research and knowledge gap is also surprising given the growing emphasis scholars working on international interventions have recently placed on the so-called ‘local’, the everyday life and micro worlds of interventions (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013; Autesserre 2014b). However, such research has, despite repeated calls to de-center the study of interventions (Birkholz et al. 2018; Turner & Kühn 2019), so far largely ignored African regional organizations as interveners, concentrating on the United Nations and other global or western interveners instead (Witt 2018).

Against this background, and with this working paper, I seek to demonstrate the feasibility and value-added of understanding societal perspectives on African interventions by presenting a methodological research agenda. Concretely, I discuss three different approaches to researching societal perspectives on African interventions: media analysis, survey research, and focus groups/interviews. Each approach is based on different data, relies on a different understanding of what counts as ‘societal’, and by consequence is able to shed light on very different aspects of societal perspectives. With societal perspectives, I mean the multiple experiences, evaluations, expectations, and knowledges held by people – elite and non-elite – living in countries affected by African regional interventions.

While not an exhaustive discussion of different methodological ways to study societal perspectives, these three approaches were selected because they have proven useful in the broader literature on the social legitimacy of international/regional organizations and of interventions in particular.<sup>2</sup> Also, unlike the study of societal protest (discursive or behavioral), the three approaches discussed here allow identification of general societal perspectives, not confined to contentious moments and actors (see O’Brien et al. 2000) and thus potentially offer a more balanced picture of the multitude

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2 A fourth methodological approach for understanding societal perspectives on interventions is through social media analysis (see generally Fielding et al. 2016; Barbéra & Steinert-Threlkeld 2020). However, compared to the other three approaches discussed in this paper, social media analysis has so far not been systematically used in works on either international/regional organizations or interventions so that to draw lessons learned (but see for instance Denskus & Esser 2013; Hellman et al. 2016). While this makes social media analysis a promising field of further methodological development, it also provided the reason for not discussing it extensively in this paper.

of societal experiences and intervention realities. In presenting these three approaches, the paper thus explicitly links the study of APSA and African regional organizations to the general literature on (peace) interventions and international/regional organizations, two bodies of literature for which a deep engagement with African experiences is still pending. Drawing on insights generated in these fields will not only help overcoming these literatures' remaining Euro/Western-centrism, but may also make visible where and how African experiences can enrich existing scholarship.

The paper proceeds in three steps. The following section briefly summarizes three different arguments for why societal perspectives matter: an instrumental, a normative, and an epistemic/analytical one. In the second section, I distinguish three different methodological approaches to studying societal perspectives on interventions. I discuss each of these approaches in the same way starting from a discussion of the strengths and fields of application of the respective approach, based on literature on international/regional organizations or intervention research. This is followed by a brief summary of insights on African interventions generated so far through the respective approach. And finally, I discuss for each approach major challenges both methodologically as well as in terms of research practice. The paper closes with a conclusion arguing for the feasibility of studying societal perspectives on African interventions. It also highlights that which method we chose is not only a matter of available resources and skills, but has a crucial impact on what kind of knowledge we generate.

## 2 WHY SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES MATTER

Scholars and practitioners alike increasingly acknowledge that in order to understand peace interventions, it is crucial to take account of the experiences and evaluations of those living in the contexts of intervention. In academia, this insight gained prominence in the context of the so-called 'local turn', which was a reaction to the obvious practical and conceptual failures of the liberal peace paradigm (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013; Hughes et al. 2015; Leonardsson & Rudd 2015). Correspondingly, policy-makers and intervening organizations increasingly embraced the language of 'local ownership', people-centeredness, and 'bottom-up' solutions (DPKO 2013: 12). African regional organizations are no exception to this. The AU seeks to become a 'people-centred' as opposed to a 'state-centred' organization (AU Commission 2013: 8), an aspiration also repeated in the ECOWAS Vision 2020 (ECOWAS 2010: 2). And the regional promotion of peace and security is supposed to serve the 'well-being of the African people' (AU 2002: Art. 3a). Individual decisions by the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) refer to respect for the 'aspiration of the people' (AU PSC 2014), 'ownership by the people of the peace process' (AU PSC 2017), and the AU's determination to 'full respect and compliance with the will and desire expressed by the people [...]' (AU PSC 2016). While at least rhetorically there seems to be a consensus that 'the local' and 'the people' matter, there is no consensual answer as to why this is the case. At least three different arguments can be distilled from both academic and policy contributions to this debate.

Firstly, understanding people's experiences and evaluations of interventions is said to matter for *instrumental* reasons. As argued by Andrea Talentino (2007: 152), how people living in intervention societies perceive and relate to an intervention is an 'essential building block for peace' (see also Karlborg 2014). This is so because interventions usually aim at deeper societal transformations that essentially require a society's active contribution. People living in intervention contexts are not passive recipients of external cures, but actively shaping what an intervention is going to achieve and how. Perceptions determine people's scope of possible action and consequently affect how those living in societies experiencing interventions will relate to the aims and strategies international interveners set out to promote. As summarized in a study for the UN's Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), 'a number of recent experiences have underscored the extent to which public confidence in a peacekeeping mission relates closely to

confidence in the peace process in general, and affects the mission's ability to execute its mandate' (DPKO 2013: 14). Understanding societal perspectives on interventions is therefore key for influencing and assessing the long-term effectiveness of an intervention. From a practical perspective, this means that understanding societal perspectives is crucial in order to ensure local support and confidence in the intervention, to adapt the promoted solutions to the contexts concerned, to create more inclusivity, and to gain information about and professionalize capabilities to analyze grievances, misconceptions, and issues of social order that are potentially in conflict with an intervention's aims (DPKO 2013: 16-18).

Secondly, understanding societal perspectives can also be justified by a *normative* argument. People living in countries under intervention are the ultimate addressees and identified 'beneficiaries' of global and regional policies to build peace and prevent conflict. As briefly summarized above, with the people-centered discourse of most of the intervening organizations, 'the people' are the ultimate reference point of interventions – thus provide justification for why such interventions are done in the first place. From a normative point of view, these people thus have a 'right to justification' (Forst 2014): whatever these policies end up doing should be justifiable with regard to and assessed against those people's own terms (see generally for global governance Steffek 2007).

And finally, there is an *epistemic/analytical* reason for studying societal perceptions of interventions. As argued by Roger Mac Ginty and Pamina Firchow (2016: 309), if in our attempts to understand international interventions we solely rely on top-down approaches based on knowledge and analytical benchmarks defined by externals (be they interveners or academics), we risk 'epistemic closure'. In other words, understanding societal perspectives on interventions allows gaining insights about the localized worlds of interventions that are otherwise too easily ignored. This includes knowledge on what international interveners actually do on the ground, such as with whom they interact, how an intervention's daily work is organized, where it faces resistance, and how this is reacted to. It also means acquiring alternative assessments as to what these practices end up doing, that is, their effects on the ground, based on people's lived, often multiple experiences and expectations rather than interveners' own aims and benchmarks. Several studies on local perceptions of interventions have already demonstrated this empirical/analytical value: in essence, they have shown how interveners and those meant to benefit from interventions often diverge in their understanding of what constitutes the most pressing peace and security challenges and what counts as a viable solution, revealing mismatches in expectations, conflicting norms and priorities, unfulfilled promises, and failed communication that shape local intervention experiences (e.g. Pouligny 2006; Hellmüller 2013; Schia et al. 2014). Understanding local perceptions of interventions thus potentially reveals gaps between international peace-making scripts and aims on the one hand and their local imprints and interpretation on the other hand. In addition, they may also shed light on local actors' affirmation of (regional) intervention policies and resulting criticism of actual practices as insufficient (see for instance Witt & Schnabel 2020).

### 3 THREE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In the following, I discuss three different methodological approaches to study societal perspectives on interventions. For each, I first present a general overview of the respective approach's strengths and potentials and how it has been used in research on international/regional organizations and interventions more broadly. This is followed by a short discussion of works using this method to study African intervention contexts. Finally, I discuss limitations and challenges of each method.

### 3.1 *Media Analysis*

*Why useful?* In recent years, analyses of media debates have gained particular prominence in research on the legitimacy and politicization of international organizations in which media is used as a proxy for understanding the societal acceptance of supranational decision-making. This also applies to the, albeit nascent, literature on the legitimacy of regional organizations (Hurrelmann & Schneider 2015a; Witt 2019). For instance, scholars use media reporting to analyse which aspects of an international/regional organization become salient in public discourse, how they are evaluated and how this is justified (Nullmeier et al. 2010; Schneider 2015; Hurrelmann et al. 2013), or which general identities and images public discourses attach to specific organizations (Bachmann & Müller 2015; Sternberg 2013). In contrast, in the literature on interventions more specifically, media has so far much less been used to analyse the local contestedness of interventions and to identify what kind of and whose critique is articulated against them (but see Narten 2008; Sabrow 2017).

Media is generally seen as an intermediary arena in-between elite decision-makers and citizenry: ‘they serve as [...] gatekeepers between political elites and the citizenry and as watchdogs with regard to political affairs’ (Schneider 2015: 178). This generally applies to different kinds of media – public and private – as well as print media or radio broadcasting. Moreover, media not only *reflects* societal attitudes, but also has a crucial impact *shaping* them (see also Elgström & Chaban 2015: 27-29). In this sense, over the past decades international and regional organizations themselves strengthened and professionalized their public communication structures, including those reaching out to media, as a strategy of self-legitimation and managing public expectations (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018). This also applies to contexts of intervention in which international and regional organizations are particularly concerned with strategic public communication to those deemed as the intervention’s beneficiaries, for instance through financing journalist trainings or setting up radio stations and social media channels (DPKO 2013; Williams 2018: chapter 11). In a survey among UN peacekeeping personnel, local media analysis appeared as the second leading method used to gain insights on local discourses and perceptions of the respective intervention (DPKO 2013: 26).

Analysis of media reporting has several strengths for understanding societal perspectives on interventions. Firstly, due to its continuous availability, media allows tracing and comparing societal perspectives over a longer time period. This also implies identification of major changes in societal perspectives over time. In an intervention context, this can for instance be useful if changes in the mandate of an intervention, in the composition of the troops/mediation team, relevant changes in relation to the mandating organization, or major events in the country (such as elections or new outbreaks of violence etc.) may have affected the societal perception of the respective intervention. Media can be used to find out whether this is indeed the case. Moreover, covering a longer timespan also allows comparing the perception of an intervening organization before and after an intervention, that is whether the concrete intervention experience may have had any effect on the general evaluation and public image of the organization. Secondly, as a source, media reports are at a more aggregate level than any of the other two data discussed below which means that insights generated from media are less prone to the criticism of simply reflecting individual attitudes. Thirdly, in terms of research practice, media analysis has an advantage for it can cover cases where the security situation or other obstacles make direct access to individuals more difficult (Hagberg & Körling 2014) and it can be done at fairly low direct costs. And finally, there is a broad spectrum of different qualitative and quantitative methods available for systematically analyzing media reports and presenting results, ranging from more standardized, automated forms (Tristl et al. 2015; Schneider 2015) to inductive, grounded-theory inspired coding and interpretation (Witt 2019).



*Insights on African interventions.* Media has so far played only a minor role in understanding African regional organizations and their intervention practices (but see Witt & Schnabel 2020). With specific focus on contexts under African regional intervention, Sten Hagberg and Gabriella Körling (2012) for instance base their analysis of the public discourse in Mali around the 2012 coup d'état on reports from Malian news media available online. With this, the authors not only show that the coup itself received quite diverging interpretation from different parts of the Malian elite. They also demonstrate that ECOWAS' implication in the early search for resolving the political crisis and the likelihood of an external intervention was locally highly contentious. While one part of the Malian elite 'supported ECOWAS for its contribution to the re-establishment of democracy', others argued that 'leaders should not be imposed on Mali from the outside' and that ECOWAS was in fact 'running errands' for the international community in recolonizing Mali (Hagberg & Körling 2012: 120). In relation to both contentious issues, however, media debates reflect ambiguous positions and gradual differences that go beyond a simple distinction of for/against the coup/intervention and therefore underline the need for fine-grained, inductive, and detailed reconstructions of the meanings people attest to such moments of crisis and regional intervention. Similarly, Sophia Sabrow's (2017) comparison of the legitimacy attributed to the African-led AFISMA mission in Mali with that attributed to the UN-led MINUSMA is based on – apart from interviews – media reports from two different Malian outlets. With this, she finds that UN and regional interventions rest on quite different kinds of legitimacies and that local standards for legitimacy in fact differ starkly from those counting in international law. So while AFISMA was cherished for being a neighborly intervention, media reports tell that its output legitimacy was highly compromised for the mission lacked the adequate resources to effectively fulfill both its mandate and Malians' expectations (Sabrow 2017: 173).

*Challenges.* Despite its clear strengths, media analysis as a methodological approach to understanding societal perspectives on interventions also comes with certain limitations. Firstly, the functions often attributed to media – serving as a transmitter between citizenry and decision-makers and as reflecting 'public opinion' – is Eurocentric and based on conditions primarily found in well-functioning and economically well-off democracies. In societies with high illiteracy rates, print media reflects and shapes only the attitudes of a particular section of society and can therefore hardly be taken as representative of society as a whole. In such a situation, reverting to radio broadcasting – which in most African countries has a much wider societal reach – could be an alternative, especially if recordings or transcripts are available. In general, the likely elite-bias does not make media an irrelevant source of data *per se*, but its limitations require active reflection and transparency with regard to whose voices are (not) taken into account (see for instance Sabrow 2017: 170). Secondly, in contexts where (print) media is under extreme economic stress, independent reporting is usually also compromised. To what extent media would be able to formulate open critique is therefore something that has to be defined at the outright of a study so as to assess the reliability of the data used. In this sense, the roles and different working contexts of private as opposed to state-owned media will have to be critically analyzed. This, however, requires contextual knowledge of the media landscape and the conditions under which journalists work in the respective country. Thirdly and connected to that, media analyses require particular language skills. In most African countries experiencing interventions, newspapers in languages other than the official (colonial) language exist which often address a less elitist readership. In other instances, only parts of a newspaper are written in African languages. From the perspective of understanding societal perspectives, these parts would be similarly interesting (as well as understanding the difference between the two in terms of content, readership etc.). The analyst's (limited) language skills thus have a clear impact as to whose and what kind of voices enter the scholarly analysis (see for instance Wahutu 2017: 50). Fourthly, access to media reports can also be a challenge. While many newspapers today also publish their articles online, not all of them have searchable archives



that cover a longer period of time. Databases such as AllAfrica.com, though behind a paywall, are surely helpful. But the pool of available newspaper outlets is still not exhaustive. And while some media outlets do have physical archives, establishing a data corpus from such archives again requires additional financial and human resources that are not always easily provided for.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, depending on the timespan covered and selection criteria, data corpora for media analyses are often quite big. In terms of data analysis, this often leads to more pragmatist approaches favoring automated analyses of pre-established categories that tend to be less time-consuming, detailed, and reconstructive of the meanings established in media debates.

### 3.2 Survey Research

*Why useful?* Public opinion research based on surveys and survey experiments is becoming increasingly popular in the literature on the social legitimacy of international and regional organizations (Torgler 2008; Dellmuth & Tallberg 2015; Dellmuth & Schlipphak 2019). Yet while survey research on public attitudes towards the European Union is a fairly well-established research field, survey research on societal attitudes towards regional organizations outside of Europe is still limited (Fioramonti 2009; Schlipphak 2015; on Africa see Kotzé & Steyn 2003). Similarly some works on the societal perceptions of international peace interventions make use of survey research, though compared to other research methods to a much lesser degree (see for instance Malone & Chavda 2013; Bøås & Drange 2018). And finally, international interveners themselves use public opinion research in order to gain information about their social acceptability and to trace their reputation in the so-called host society (DPKO 2013: 26; Williams 2018: chapter 11).

Compared to analyses of (local) media, survey research provides information on a less aggregate level as the collected information directly stems from the individuals concerned. There are two broad ways of conducting survey research: either by relying on already-existing third-party data such as the *World Values Survey* and regional surveys, the *Afrobarometer* in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa; or by developing a new survey that is more tailor-made to the respective research question. In the latter case, the survey can be conducted either directly (e.g. asking respondents directly), through digital devices such as mobile phones, or by using the service of a professional firm offering pre-existing panels. In the first two cases, the panel – that is the pool of respondents – can be newly established according to whichever criteria are deemed relevant (e.g. balancing urban/rural population, women/men) while in the third case the sample as well as additional information about the respondents are pre-given and fix. Whichever way is chosen, there are several general strengths attached to this method. Firstly, survey research, particularly if based on already existing comprehensive survey data allows for large-N studies that provide general insights beyond individual cases. Existing survey data may also be available covering a larger period of time, which allows longitudinal analysis of changes and continuities in societal attitudes. Secondly, survey research can be used as a valuable starting point for examining causal relationships, e.g. whether gender, age, and education play a role for people's affirmative or critical stand *vis-à-vis* an international intervention. Unlike media analyses, survey research thus allows for methodologically better reflecting the fact that societal perspectives are usually multiple, sometimes even starkly diverging, and hence require more accurate means to identify different groups and categories of perspectives. And finally, as a methodological approach survey research is – under current dominant (positivist) research standards – a high currency: because it easily speaks the language and fulfills dominant (positivist) standards for rigorousness and representativeness and

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3 If articles have previously been available but have not been archived by the respective media outlet, services such as the *Way Back Machine* (<https://archive.org/web/>) could be a useful tool to recover past entries. The *Internet Archive* may also help to create new online archives of media reports that will be available for other researchers (or citizens) in the future. I thank Katharina Döring for pointing this out to me.

because insights generated from survey research can be presented in a clear, easily graspable, and visualized way.

*Insights on African interventions.* With regard to African intervention contexts, insights generated from survey research are so far rarely used. One exception is Paul D. Williams's (2018) study on the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which is partly based on survey research conducted by the peacekeeping mission itself. With this, the author distinguishes different phases of AMISOM's public perception over the ten years of deployment. He also shows the positive effect of AMISOM's more professional strategic communication (Williams 2018: 291); yet altogether survey results also underline the mission's challenges in strategically communicating AMISOM's mandate *vis-à-vis* a population that expects an international peacekeeping mission to first of all protect and deliver services to civilians (Williams 2018: 295). So far, data from the *Afrobarometer* survey has not yet been used for a systematic analysis of societal perspectives on African regional organizations and their interventions.<sup>4</sup> Markus Olapade et al. (2016) present findings from the 2014/15 survey round and questions directly dealing with regional organizations. With regard to interventions, the data for instance show that across 36 countries, the majority of respondents (58%) were against regional organizations' having powers to intervene in member states in defense of human rights or democracy, instead emphasizing the importance of national sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> However, the data also suggests great sub-regional and national variances: Compared to the rest of Sub Sahara Africa, West Africans were most positive about a regional responsibility for human rights and democracy (40%), while North and Central Africans were most skeptical (63%). At the country level, citizens of Burkina Faso, who in 2014 had just experienced a regional intervention in support of constitutionalism, responded most positively (66% in favour of regional responsibility) while citizens of São Tomé and Príncipe (14%), Tunisia (18%), and Madagascar (19%) were most skeptical (Olapade et al. 2016: 11).<sup>6</sup> This suggests that how people think about the potential role of regional organizations in their realm of jurisdiction indeed seems to be dependent on concrete context and lived experiences (see also Schlipphak 2015: 368).

*Challenges.* Despite the strengths of survey research as summarized above, there are also clear challenges both methodologically as well as in terms of research practice. While gathering data on a less aggregate level than for instance media analysis, survey research is a very top-down methodology that provides respondents with only limited agency to shape the content and outcomes of a study. Survey questions are usually pre-defined and determined by the researcher's own knowledge and interests. And while there are different ways to collecting answers – as yes/no binaries, as scales, or as list of substantive answers – they are all predefined and authored by the researchers themselves. Thus, while gaining insights on already established questions and research problems, survey research cannot reveal whether and to what extent the questions concerned mattered for the respondents in the first place or whether respondents would have answered similarly if they had given the chance to give a completely open, spontaneous answer. In a nutshell, respondents' own sense-making narratives are outside of what survey research is able to grasp. The Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) project provides a fascinating example to remedy this top-down character of survey research by working with a survey questionnaire that was generated bottom-up

4 The author currently prepares a comprehensive analysis of *Afrobarometer* data in the context of the research project "Local perceptions of regional interventions: AU and ECOWAS in Burkina Faso and The Gambia", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

5 Concretely, respondents were asked whether they agreed/disagreed with one of these two statements: 'Statement 1: The governments of each country in [XX] Africa have a duty to try to guarantee free elections and prevent human rights abuses in other countries in the region, for example by using political pressure, economic sanctions or military force. Statement 2: Each country in this region should respect the independence of other countries and allow them to make their own decisions about how their country should be governed.'

6 *Afrobarometer* conducted the field research in Burkina Faso between 19 April and 5 May 2015, that is before the September 2015 coup and the renewed AU/ECOWAS intervention in Burkina Faso (Isbell 2016: 2).

through focus group interviews (Firchow 2018: chapter 3; Mac Ginty & Firchow 2014). Such an approach ‘sought to use people’s own voices in identifying the issues to be researched and the terminology in which those issues were expressed’ (Mac Ginty & Firchow 2014: 36). Yet such workarounds require, as the EPI project showcases, compromises in the number of cases considered and they demand additional human, financial and time resources – all of which are not always provided abundantly in academic life. Secondly, although survey research can be a starting point into causal examination, the data generated through surveys usually cannot provide holistic answers as to why people chose one or the other answer. For instance, the above-cited *Afrobarometer* data on individual attitudes towards regional responsibility may suggest that respondents in Burkina Faso were particularly positive about regional responsibility in defense of human rights and democracy because the country had just experienced a regional intervention in support of constitutional order (Olapade et al. 2016: 11). Yet this is not more than a reasonable assumption which can only be substantiated further based on respondents’ own explanations. Thus survey research can provide valuable insights into both general levels of public opinion towards a particular question and – through statistical correlation – hypotheses about the causal relationship explaining this general level. But survey research cannot ultimately explain *why* people chose to hold one or the other opinion. And finally, if not based on pre-existing data, developing a survey research from the scratch can be a daunting, costly undertaking that does not only require technical know-how but also contextual knowledge about the (usually large number of) places in which survey research is planned to be conducted.

### 3.3 *Focus Groups/Interviews*

*Why useful?* So far the literature on the social legitimacy of international and regional organizations has only exceptionally used focus groups or narrative interviews to establish what ordinary citizens and people living in countries affected by IO policies think and expect of these organizations. However, studies using these methods have demonstrated the value-added of rich empirical data capturing the narratives and sense-making practices of so-called laypeople. They have established which aspects of global governance (e.g. policies or politics) are most contested/accepted socially, on what grounds people assess international institutions, as well as what general level of knowledge people hold about global governance institutions (see for instance Hurrelmann et al. 2015; Van Ingelgom 2015; Hurrelmann & Schneider 2015b). In turn, the literature on international interventions has to far extensively built on narrative interviews and focus group research in order to gain insights on the general local acceptability of international interventions, issues of local contestation, and on how specific groups such as intermediary actors or ex-combatants perceive a given intervention (see for instance Pouligny 2006; Autesserre 2009; Autesserre 2014a; Karlborg 2014; Kohl 2015; Sabrow 2017; Müller & Bashar 2017; Mahr 2018; Birkholz et al. 2018). International interveners such as the UN also use focus group research and interviews to gain insights on what host societies expect from them and how their presence is perceived locally. As concluded by the DPKO, although ‘focus groups appear to be a somewhat underused tool in peacekeeping missions [...] [they] can assist missions in understanding the perceptions of key groups of actors and designing interventions that are responsive to local concerns and priorities’ (DPKO 2013: 28).

Focus group and interview research are obviously two different things. Focus groups are ‘discussions among carefully selected individuals guided by a skilled moderator who follows a well-constructed but loose and flexible interview guide’ (Stewart & Shamdasani 2015: 75). Focus group discussions offer rich in-depth data on the terms and justifications used by the research participants themselves, while the group context creates a situation of intersubjective meaning-making in which participants are confronted with challenges to their positions, react to each other, and refine their statements (Stewart & Shamdasani 2015: 45). This allows ‘more wide-ranging

information in a single session than would result from one-to-one interviews' (Hennink 2007: 4). Interviews in turn collect individual accounts in one-to-one situations – with more or less interference by the interviewer (see generally Kvale 2007). However, both methodological approaches share certain strengths and weaknesses which is why they are considered together here. Compared to the other two methodological approaches discussed above, focus group and interview research gathers the most direct form of data: people's own accounts. In this sense, a key strength of this approach is that it leaves an important amount of agency to the individual interviewees/participants, is sensitive to their preferences and priorities, and records their own way of making sense of – that is describing and explaining – the particular issue at hand. Focus groups and interview research are therefore particularly valuable for exploratory research on something about which little knowledge exists so far (as societal perceptions of African regional interventions) and it holds the greatest potentials to generate new, surprising insights as the research is least 'front-loaded' by already existing categories, meanings, and explanations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 143). Also focus groups and interviews are particularly suitable as method to reflect the multiplicity of perspectives usually found in intervention contexts. Through strategic sampling, this can be used to identify different types of perspectives as well as social groups particularly dominant in holding them.

*Insights on African interventions.* With regard to African intervention contexts, so far little systematic knowledge exists that relies on direct individual accounts generated through focus group or interview research with people living in countries affected by African interventions. The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) project partly relies on focus groups with civil society actors, yet in the individual reports' evaluations insights generated from such data play only a minor role compared to other, external and 'hard' criteria to assess a mission's effectiveness. Nevertheless, the report on AMISOM, the only solely African-led mission in the sample, finds that for Somali civil society actors, AMISOM 'was least credible when over-exaggerating its gains against al-Shabaab, investigating abuses and corruption perpetrated by its own personnel, and when reporting about its own casualties' (Williams et al. 2018: 92). Thus from the perspective of Somali civil society, principles such as honesty and moderation played an unexpectedly crucial role for measuring 'success' of a mission. Moreover, focus groups also revealed that Somali participants held clear priorities with regard to their preferred areas of engagement for AMISOM, which diverged from the mission's own self-images and plans (Williams et al. 2018: 92). Further than that, focus group and interview research is more prevalent in policy-oriented research, which as a general rule of thumb favors empirically-rich, qualitative research (see de Coning & Drange 2017: 8). A study conducted by the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) for instance shows 'that many people in Somalia hold views that are critical towards the peacekeeping mission' (IRRI 2017: 4). More concretely, the study *inter alia* shows how little Somali citizens know about AMISOM's concrete mandate, especially the fact that the mission's primary mandate is to protect Somali institutions, not civilians – which in turn creates fodder for deception and anger (IRRI 2017: 32). The study also reveals that in general, AMISOM is seen as a 'foreign intervention' whose protagonists pursue their own, not Somalis' interests. But the origin of peacekeepers also matters: Ethiopian troops and those from Kenya were assessed particularly negative while the military personnel from Djibouti was portrayed in much more positive terms (IRRI 2017: 21-22). And finally, focus groups and interviews also point out that the perception of and satisfaction with AMISOM heavily depends on people's concrete experiences with the mission, making locality but also the positive effect of civic engagement policies a key explanation for the diverging experiences and evaluations of the mission (IRRI 2017: 27).

*Challenges.* Despite the elaborated strengths of focus groups and interview research, both approaches also come with clear limitations and challenges. Firstly, gathering and analyzing societal perspectives through interviews and focus groups is a time-consuming process, requiring

intimate knowledge of and longer presence in the contexts concerned. As a general rule, these requirements are not compatible with all stages of private and academic life and may not be in line with academic publication pressures. Secondly, due to the time-consuming process of data gathering, the number of case studies covered is usually small, rarely moving beyond two per researcher. This can be remedied by working in bigger research teams, yet unless this team is composed of self-funded researchers, this also requires substantially more funds. While such case studies offer rich empirical knowledge, their small number has negative effects on the generalizability of the insights gained as well as on the possibilities of intra-regional comparison, and they usually offer less information on longitudinal trends. Thirdly, focus group and interview research is particularly prone to disruptions due to worsening political and security situations or other unforeseen developments that make field research and direct interaction with the individuals concerned difficult or impossible (see for a discussion Hagberg & Körling 2012; Witt & Schnabel 2020). In contexts under intervention or those having experienced one recently, such situations are not unlikely to emerge. But even if such dramatic obstacles do not occur, access to those identified as key interlocutors can be a problem. Not least, this also includes language barriers, which are particularly relevant when focus groups and interviews are sought to be conducted in different, including rural, parts of a given country. Finally, the advantage of producing rich data on people's own narratives and sense-making practices also comes with a shortcoming: such data is usually less easily communicable. Describing complex narratives and relevant nuances usually ends up in long texts whose content and value-added can neither be summarized in one simple sentence nor visualized in graphs and curves. More often than not, such texts also sit uncomfortably with the standards of most international peer reviewed journals, whose word limits and (implicitly) expected structure of a manuscript leave little room for deviance. This may not be a problem of focus group and interview research *per se*. But it is an undeniable fact one should consider when choosing this method. There are, however, also examples of how to combine complex narratives with, say, more graphical illustrations of a research project's results and of such research to be published even in high-ranked disciplinary journals (see for instance Hurrelmann et al. 2015).

#### 4 CONCLUSION

By promoting and enforcing continental and sub-regional norms, African regional organizations are increasingly present in their member states. This holds particularly true for the area of peace and security, in which the norms and instruments of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) have been regularly applied across the continent. However, the scholarly literature on APSA has so far largely focused on top-down institutional and normative questions and has spent little effort to understand the actual practices and outcomes of APSA, including how these are made sense of and reacted to 'on the ground' (Witt 2018). Unsurprisingly therefore, a methodological discussion on how to study the societal side of APSA is still pending. In order to contribute towards a deeper understanding of the societal consequences of and reactions to such engagements, I presented in this working paper a methodological agenda to study societal perspectives on African regional interventions. In so doing, I discussed three different approaches to studying societal perspectives on African regional interventions: media analysis, survey research, and interview/focus group research. In presenting and discussing these three different approaches, based on existing literature in the field of international organization and intervention research, I demonstrated that studying societal perspectives on APSA is both feasible and insightful. The few existing studies on African intervention contexts using either of the discussed approaches further underline this point. They also provide clues for how to extend each of the approaches further so that to reach to more systematic and multi-case research approaches. Broadly speaking, such works demonstrate the multiplicity of societal perspectives and experiences with African interventions that altogether put African regional organizations' (simplistic) claim to people-

centeredness in question. However, while societal perspectives may reveal how and why APSA practices are contested locally, they also point to a surprising level of appreciation and support for the norms and principles of African regional peace and security governance. Moreover, understanding societal perspectives helps to shed light on the multiple priorities and expectations Africans hold towards APSA. And finally, the three methodological approaches discussed here may also provide important new insights on the relationships and interactions between APSA actors and people and groups living in the countries of deployment, including how organizations such as the AU themselves use different devices to learn and 'know' the societies in which they intervene.

Though not an exhaustive discussion of all possible methodological approaches, the three approaches presented here were deliberately selected for they transgress the simple binary of qualitative vs. quantitative research. In fact, all three can be used for more or less qualitative or quantitative analysis. They can nevertheless be differentiated on a continuum between more positivist and more interpretative methodologies (see generally Hollis & Smith 1991; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). Depending on how data is analyzed and presented concretely, each general approach could be located at different points on this continuum.

	Strengths	Challenges
Media Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longitudinal analysis in order to trace important changes in perspectives</li> <li>• Data at an aggregate level</li> <li>• Not prone to disruptions due to unforeseen events (e.g. violence, pandemics)</li> <li>• Available for analysis through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elite-bias (especially for non-Western contexts)</li> <li>• Reliability of data depends on political context (censorship, media freedom etc.)</li> <li>• Requires language skills</li> <li>• Access</li> <li>• Large data corpus may lead to time-consuming data analysis</li> </ul>
Survey Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data on a less aggregate level (individual responses)</li> <li>• Allows for large-N and longitudinal studies</li> <li>• Examination of causal relationships</li> <li>• Representativeness and rigorousness of data</li> <li>• Easy to digest presentation and visualization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top-down methodology (little agency left to respondents)</li> <li>• Despite statistical correlation, limited explanatory power</li> <li>• Costly, time-consuming and skill dependent method (esp. if not based on pre-existing data)</li> </ul>
Interviews/Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gathering people's direct accounts (agency of respondents very high)</li> <li>• Particularly valuable for exploratory research</li> <li>• Holds greatest potential to generate new and surprising results</li> <li>• Useful for grasping the multiplicity of perspectives in a given context</li> <li>• Representativeness through strategic sampling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small number of cases (generalizability)</li> <li>• Data gathering time-consuming, costly, and requiring intimate contextual knowledge</li> <li>• Prone to disruptions due to unforeseen events (e.g. violence, pandemics)</li> <li>• Access (language barriers, status etc.)</li> <li>• Large data corpus that is less easily presentable and visualizable</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of Strengths and Challenges



For each approach, I discussed strengths and challenges (see also table 1). As highlighted for all three approaches, whether they are feasible in a concrete research situation depends on certain conditions: the three approaches require varying degrees and forms of human and financial resources, time, data availability, technical know-how and case-specific knowledge, as well as access to people and networks. However, even if all these conditions are met, which approach is taken is not just a matter of possibility and (personal) preference. Rather, as demonstrated in this paper the choice of a method has crucial implications for what kind of knowledge is generated: each approach produces quite different stories about societal perspectives and thereby answers quite different questions. What is more, because they are all grounded in different research traditions, they fulfill different standards as to what counts as 'valuable' (academic) knowledge. In other words, in the economy of academic knowledge production media analysis, survey research, and focus groups are different currencies. Hence which methodological path is chosen not only defines what kind of knowledge will be generated, but also who and where this knowledge will be accepted as scientific and valuable.

As a consequence of these constraints and in order to develop a more holistic understanding of societal perspectives on APSA, a combination of different methodological approaches is particularly promising (see also DPKO 2013; Hurrelmann & Schneider 2015a). This not only allows transgressing divides between different research traditions and producing richer empirical insights. It also means demonstrating for concrete cases what kind of society and societal perspectives each of the discussed approaches is able to reveal.



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